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SUBJECT: ASSAM POLICE CLAIM TO THWART AIRPLANE HIJACK ATTEMPT BY ULFA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On February 9, Assam Police claimed to have thwarted plans to hijack a Deccan Air plane, with the arrest of three suspects. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), alleged by the Assam police to be backed by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), planned to hijack a plane from Guwahati airport to Thimpu, Bhutan, and then to Pakistan. The young men were reportedly trained in a remote, forested area on the India-Bhutan border by unidentified "outsiders." Information from one of the arrested, ULFA member Manoj Tamuly, led to arrests of lawyer Nekibur Zaman, human rights activist Lachit Bordoloi, journalist Pradeep Gogoi and Deccan Air ground staff Suman Datta for alleged involvement in the planned hijacking. Local police often abuse detainees during interrogation, rendering confessions suspect. However, ULFA is violently active in Assam, has previously attacked the rail network, and would be capable of planning and attempting a hijacking. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Assam Police claimed to have thwarted a hijacking plan with the arrest of three suspects. Inspector General (Special Branch) Khagen Sharma said that ULFA, allegedly backed by the Pakistan's ISI, planned to hijack a plane from Guwahati airport to Thimpu, Bhutan, and then to Pakistan. On February 9, ULFA member Manoj Tamuly was arrested in Guwahati with a pistol and four rounds of ammunition. Assam Inspector General (Law and Order) Chandranathan told Post that Tamuly was detained initially for his plot to kill a police superintendent. During interrogations, he revealed the hijacking plans and named a number of people involved. The list of suspects included lawyer Nekibur Zaman, human rights activist Lachit Bordoloi, journalist Pradeep Gogoi and Deccan Air ground staff Suman Datta. All have been arrested. Sharma told Post that a group of 16 young men - four at a time -- had been trained in the jungles on the India-Bhutan border by unidentified "outsiders" and Chandranathan claimed ISI played a major role in the training. A small proto-type of an aircraft was used to familiarize the trainees of technical details. The trainees later boarded real flights for familiarization. According to Chandranathan, the aim of a hijacking was to get jailed ULFA members as well as suspected Muslim militants presently jailed in Assam released. Sharma said that airports have been on high alert for over a month because police had some intimation of a possible hijacking plan. Airport security has been increased and the high alert

remains as police continue to investigate for more details regarding the hijacking attempt.

¶13. (SBU) Chandranathan observed that police had expected the smaller Assam airports, with less adequate infrastructure to be more vulnerable than Guwahati, but the larger airport in the state capital was in fact the target. The trainers for the hijacking were Hindi-speakers and not locals and are believed to no longer be in Assam. The arrested Deccan Air staff, Suman Datta, had been under suspicion since January, even before Tamuly's arrest. The militants trained Datta how to smuggle weapons and explosives into the airport and aircraft. Chandranathan admitted that despite a strict vigil and high alert among officials and airport staff, the airport security standards are not foolproof because of the inadequate infrastructure.

¶14. (SBU) On February 11, police arrested Bordoloi in Dibrugarh district in connection with the ULFA hijack plot. Bordoloi is convener of the human rights group Manab Adhikar Suraksha Samiti (MASS) and one of the People's Consultative Group (PCG) that has been trying to facilitate peace talks between the GOI and ULFA. Sharma said evidence of correspondence between Tamuly and Bordoloi were found, although there are other cases against him too. On February 10, police detained a Guwahati High Court lawyer Nekibur Zaman for alleged involvement in the planned hijack. Most of the cases handled by Zaman in court were related to the ULFA. Zaman was hospitalized after he was injured while trying to escape from the police. The same day, police arrested Datta, an employee of Shija Tours, the ground handling agent of Deccan. Gogoi was arrested for helping the militants enter Guwahati. On February 12, all were produced in court by the police to seek a 14-day custody.

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¶15. (SBU) ULFA, however, contacted the media and issued a denial of the hijacking conspiracy and claimed that this was a campaign by security officials to scuttle the possibility of a peace process in Assam. On February 14, Union Cabinet Secretary K.M. Chandrasekhar along with Union Defense Secretary Vijay Singh and Special Secretary in the Union Home Ministry M.L. Kumawat visited Guwahati reportedly to determine the course of peace efforts with the ULFA. They also participated in a meeting of the Unified Command for counter-insurgency operations and reviewed the law and order situation in Assam.

¶16. (SBU) Comment: Assam police allegations of ISI support to ULFA in the hijacking plot are difficult to assess. ConGen has met with former northeast ethnic insurgents who have readily admitted receiving support from Pakistan in the past. So, some links between ISI and ULFA are possible. While the standard police practice of forcing confessions during interrogation makes any admissions of guilt or conspiracies suspect, ULFA has a clear record of terrorist attacks on transportation and other security sites. Its attacks on the transportation network have focused on trains and train stations but given the increase of regional flights in the northeast, a plane hijacking may have been seen as a natural progression in ULFA's terrorist campaign.

JARDINE